

## February 13, 2008: Egypt: USCIRF Calls on Egyptian Government to Respect, Enforce Court Rulings Concerning Freedom of Religion or Belief, Urges Broader Protections

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Feb. 13, 2008

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WASHINGTON-The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom calls on the Egyptian government to respect and enforce a series of judicial rulings that recognize limited rights of the members of some religious minority communities. On Saturday, Egypt's highest court reversed a lower court's ruling prohibiting citizens from returning to Christianity after converting to Islam. Last month, the same court overturned an Egyptian government ban on providing official identity documents to members of the Baha'i faith by allowing Baha'is to put "other" or not list their religious affiliation at all. Until that ruling, identity documents permitted registration in only one of the three officially approved faiths-Islam, Christianity, or Judaism-thereby effectively preventing Baha'is from gaining the official recognition necessary to have access to numerous public services.

"These twin decisions can be helpful steps toward meaningful reform if respected by Egyptian authorities," said Commission Chair Michael Cromartie. "After a long period of setbacks in the sphere of religious freedom, Egyptian courts have delivered some rulings that have the potential to help address aspects of these discriminatory policies. The next essential step is for these rulings to be fully implemented in practice."

The Commission nevertheless continues to be concerned over other, serious violations of the freedom of thought, conscience, and religion or belief in Egypt. Just last week, a court denied the right of Muhammed Hegazy to convert to Christianity from Islam. Citing Article II of the Egyptian constitution, which says that Islamic law is the principal source of legislation, the judge ruled that since Hegazy was born Muslim and since Islam is the "final and most complete religion," he could not convert to another, allegedly less "complete" belief, such as Christianity. Hegazy, who has been subjected to death threats for trying to exercise the right to choose his religion freely, is the first convert to Christianity to sue Egypt for rejecting his application to officially change his religious affiliation on identity documents.

Even the most court recent ruling, in fact, leaves wide latitude for continued discrimination against religious minorities. In the case of the 12 people allowed to return to Christianity, the court ruled that their identity documents must list them as "ex-Muslim"-potentially opening a new avenue for continued prejudicial treatment by officials responsible for providing public services, police harassment, and societal violence.

"The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights provides that the freedom of religion includes 'the freedom to have or to adopt a religion or belief of (one's) choice,'" Cromartie said. "Egypt has a long and fabled history of religious diversity, and it is a tradition that can enrich the nation today. The government and the courts should protect the internationally recognized freedom of religion or belief for individuals of all faiths."

The Commission has previously called on the U.S. government to urge the Egyptian government to ensure that every Egyptian is protected against discrimination by modifying the national identity card such that the religious affiliation category is either eliminated or made optional. The Commission has also recommended that the U.S. government urge the Egyptian government to remove de facto responsibility for religious affairs from the State Security Services, and to repeal Article 98(f) in the Penal Code, which criminalizes insulting Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. The full list of the Commission's recommendations regarding freedom of religion in Egypt can be found in the 2007 Annual Report (<http://www.uscifr.gov/countries/publications/currentreport/2007annualRpt.pdf#page=1>) .

USCIRF is an independent, bipartisan federal commission that advises the President, Secretary of State, and Congress on how to promote religious freedom and associated rights around the world. It was created by the U.S. Congress in the International Religious Freedom Act of 1998 (IRFA).